

Pope warns of new forms of genetic discrimination

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI praised modern discoveries in the field of genetics, but warned of new and subtle efforts to discriminate against people with genetic defects or illnesses.

“Any discrimination carried out by any power against persons, populations or ethnic groups on the basis of real or presumed genetic factors is an attack against all humanity,” the pope said.

He made the remarks in a speech Feb. 21 to participants of an international conference sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life on the topic “The New Frontiers of Genetics and the Risk of Eugenics.”

The pope said genetic research had taken giant steps in recent years, opening new horizons for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases and giving new hope to many people. But he said the advances were sometimes accompanied by a tendency to reduce human beings to their genetic makeup.

“Man will always be greater than all that which makes up his body; in fact, he possesses the power of thought, which is always directed toward the truth about himself and about the world,” he said.

“Every human being, therefore, is much more than the singular combination of genetic information that is transmitted to him by parents,” he said.

The pope said the risk of eugenics, which aims to improve the human species by selective breeding, is no longer found in the racist ideologies of state regimes, but

rather in a new mentality that tends to value human life for its capacity for work, efficiency and physical beauty.

When a genetic defect or illness appears, from the moment of conception onward, the person's life is often judged as "not worthy of being lived," he said.

The pope said it should be forcefully affirmed that every person has equal dignity by virtue of being alive, and that his "biological, psychic and cultural development or state of health can never become a discriminatory element."

He said society should focus on building a "culture of acceptance and love" marked by solidarity with those who suffer and the removal of barriers that are often erected against the disabled or the sick. In no case should human life be selected or suppressed on the basis of an abstract ideal of physical health or perfection, he said.

The pope said it was especially important that these principles be applied to life at its earliest stages.

"If man is reduced to an object of experimental manipulation from the first stages of his development, it means that medical biotechnology is surrendering to the will of the strongest," he said. Trust in science must not make people forget the primacy of ethics when human life is involved, he said.